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Raising urban students' literacy achievement by engaging in authentic, challenging work

The In2Books program has been used in one urban public school system to improve students' literacy. In the program, students correspond with adult pen pals to discuss books they have read.

Regardless of how literacy achievement is measured—by standardized tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or Stanford Achievement Test–10, through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, the “Nation’s Report Card”), or even with portfolio approaches—a universal conclusion drawn from the data is that, on the whole, a “performance gap” exists in elementary schools in the United States. Students from low-income backgrounds perform significantly lower in reading and writing achievement than students from higher income families, and African American and Latino students consistently score lower in reading and writing than Caucasian students. This pattern applies across grade levels tested and in every state in the United States that participated in NAEP from 1992 through 2003 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003a). Because the students attending urban elementary schools are disproportionately poorer and African American or Latino, the issue of literacy education in urban school districts is especially acute.

Numerous reports have provided data on why urban students experience significantly more difficulty in reading and writing. Funding inequity, poverty, high student and teacher mobility, a home–school “disconnect,” and lack of adequate

teacher preparation, among other things, have all been described as playing a role. See, for example, Clark’s (2002) research review or the International Reading Association volume *Literacy Development of Students in Urban Schools: Research and Policy* (Flood & Anders, 2005).

Despite the challenges of literacy education in settings with high concentrations of poor and ethnically diverse populations, such as urban schools, recent studies have documented success stories of significant increases in student literacy achievement in these settings. Our purpose in writing this article is to analyze the effects of one successful literacy curriculum innovation, In2Books (I2B). Developed by Nina Zolt (2005) to help address the performance gap just discussed, I2B is designed to motivate students in grades 2–5 to read, think, and write by matching them with adult pen pals coached to discuss important subjects through letters about thought-provoking books. I2B was originally implemented in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) where students typically score at or near the bottom nationally on standardized reading achievement measures (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003b). Having worked over the years both with this project and also with other efforts at school and district literacy reform in challenging urban schools (see, for example, Fitzgerald et al., 2002; Gambrell, Almasi, Xie, & Heland, 1995; Office of Literacy, Chicago Public Schools, 2004; Teale & Martinez, 1996), we were prompted to ask the underlying question: What accounted for the results found in DCPS?

Success stories

Recent studies that have documented how significant increases in student literacy achievement for historically underachieving students were accomplished include those carried out by Taylor, Pearson, and colleagues under the umbrella of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) School Change Study (e.g., Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003, 2005) and the Standards-Based Change Process (SBCP) work of Au and colleagues in Hawaii (e.g., Au, 2001, 2006) and Raphael and colleagues in Chicago (e.g., Au, Hirata, & Raphael, 2005). Though not conducted exclusively in urban schools, the Taylor/Pearson work has focused on high-poverty populations, with the vast majority of students in their samples being from culturally diverse backgrounds. Their studies described the schools that raised literacy achievement as collaborative learning communities led by an enthusiastic leadership team and as having teachers effective at teaching necessary skills while also engaging their students in challenging, authentic literacy experiences. Furthermore, their analyses indicated that the process was accomplished through a combination of grass roots reform centered on changing classroom practice and the simultaneous creation of professional communities of practice.

In a similar vein, the SBCP work has demonstrated success in building teacher literacy expertise and turning around student literacy achievement patterns in historically underachieving schools. The researchers attribute the success of SBCP to professional development that involved teachers learning to make wise instructional decisions by

- aligning ongoing classroom assessments with end-of-year targets based in state standards and
- basing instructional decisions on students' needs, as indicated by their progress toward meeting the end-of-year goals.

The researchers in both the Hawaii and Chicago projects found that the process of each school's defining its "vision" of the literate student catalyzed development of a schoolwide professional learning community that was integral to boosting student achievement.

These descriptions resonate in interesting ways with what we noticed as we analyzed the implementation of I2B in DCPS. Chief among the parallels was the idea that true literacy reform depends as much upon establishing stimulating learning environments for teachers as on enhancing the learning environments of students. Coupled with this was the role that authentic, challenging student work played in effecting increased literacy skills among students.

In2Books—What is it and what happened?

As we considered the aforementioned studies and analyzed what we saw happening with I2B in the context of the DCPS, a number of parallels, as well as new insights, struck us as informative. The I2B initiative involved urban teachers and students. Over 80% of the I2B children attended Title 1 schools (schools in which more than half of the students in the school are low-income). During the 2004–2005 school year, I2B was used with nearly 5,000 children and their 230 plus teachers in grades 2–5 in approximately 60% of DCPS elementary schools.

How I2B works

Across the course of the school year, students receive five carefully selected, grade-level books in different genres or domains: fiction, social studies, biography, folktales, and science. The students keep the books. For each of the five cycles during the year, teachers receive, in addition to these books, related read-aloud books and a curriculum guide designed to help them plan reading and writing activities for a unit around the books and genre.

Students are matched with adult pen pals, recruited from leading businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies in the area. The pen pals read the same books and are coached via a rich website environment (Pen Pal Place, <http://penpals.in2books.org>) in how to write effective letters to students about the books. Their tutorial shows them, among other things, how to comment on important ideas or information from the book, make connections with the book (text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world), ask open-ended

questions that encourage student response, make personal connections with the children, and write in language understandable to students. Pen pals submit their letters electronically, typically with embedded clip art or other graphics and designs intended to make the letter attractive.

During each cycle, students and teachers study a genre or domain, focusing especially on the I2B book (for each cycle at each grade level, up to three books at varying difficulty levels are available), and engaging in various discussion, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing activities shown by research to be effective (details on activities can be found in the I2B genre guides archived at the In2Books Teacher Place, <http://teacher.in2books.org>). In class, on an appointed delivery day, each student receives an actual “hard copy” letter from his or her pen pal. This is always a time of great excitement for the class. They read and reread their letters and then, over a number of days, engage in the culminating activity for each cycle—writing letters about the books in response to their pen pal letters. The letter writing is completed through a writing process approach (e.g., Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). The I2B website has several examples of letters written between students and pen pals. See http://penpals.in2books.org/letters_penpals_c0.aspx#.

Research on the effects of I2B

During the 2003–2004 school year a systematic evaluation was conducted that examined the relation of I2B implementation to student reading achievement at grades 2–4 (at that time I2B was piloting in grade 5, so that grade was not included in analyses). DCPS scores on the SAT-9 Reading Test for all students tested in the district were analyzed for achievement patterns in I2B versus non-I2B classrooms. The following four categories (with numbers of participating students and classrooms) were examined in the analyses:

1. Veteran I2B. Classrooms in which teachers had been implementing the program for two or more years (grade 2: 11 classrooms, 163 students; grade 3: 26 classrooms, 462 students; grade 4: 21 classrooms, 390 students).
2. First-Year I2B. Classrooms in which teachers implemented the program for the first time during the 2003–2004 school year

(grade 2: 12 classrooms, 206 students; grade 3: 33 classrooms, 570 students; grade 4: 24 classrooms, 428 students).

3. Total I2B. Veteran + First-Year I2B classrooms and students (grade 2: 23 classrooms, 369 students; grade 3: 59 classrooms, 1,032 students; grade 4: 45 classrooms, 818 students).
4. Non-I2B classrooms. Classrooms in DCPS whose teachers were not participating in I2B in any way and did not implement the program in their classrooms that year (grade 2: 1,865 students; grade 3: 3,121 students; grade 4: 3,648 students). (The number of non-I2B classrooms could not be determined from the DCPS database that supplied the scores used in the analyses because data from numerous schools were labeled “No Name Given.” Therefore, only numbers of students are provided.)

Table 1 provides the mean scale scores and standard deviations for each of the three I2B groups at each grade level. Results were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance within each grade, with a four-level grouping variable (Goldman, 2004). In every case, there was a statistically significant main effect of group, with students in I2B teachers’ classrooms performing at higher levels compared with students not in the program. Tukey’s post hoc tests showed that the significant differences between means occurred in the cells marked with asterisks in Table 1.

- At all three grade levels, Veteran I2B teachers’ students scored significantly higher in reading than non-I2B students.
- Performance comparisons of the First Year I2B group and of the overall sample of I2B classrooms (Total I2B) with the non-I2B group varied depending on the grade level. At grades 3 and 4, students in First-Year I2B classrooms and the Total I2B sample scored significantly higher than students in non-I2B classrooms; scores were statistically equivalent in both cases at grade 2.

The calculated effect size for the significant difference at second grade was small (.16), with effect

TABLE 1
Mean SAT-9 reading test scale scores (standard deviations)

Grade level	Veteran I2B	First-Year I2B	Total I2B	Non-I2B
2	584.5* (36.5)	580.5 (36.7)	582.3 (36.6)	578.7 (35.6)
3	626.9*** (47.7)	612.9* (48.2)	619.2*** (48.4)	607.7 (40.9)
4	637.3*** (46.1)	637.5* (44.3)	637.4** (45.1)	626.8 (39.2)

Note. *** $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

sizes in grades 3 and 4 ranging from small to moderate (.26–.46).

This pattern of findings led to the conclusion that results from the DCPS-administered SAT-9 Reading Test showed that students in I2B classrooms outperformed students in comparison classrooms on a nationally normed, standardized assessment of reading achievement. At each grade level, students in one or more of the I2B groups scored significantly higher than the non-I2B group. It should also be remembered that the vast majority of students in the I2B group (80–83%, depending on grade level) were from Title I schools. (Additionally, analyses comparing achievement patterns in only Title I I2B schools with non-I2B students showed the same overall results.) Thus, the score patterns indicated that students who experienced I2B as part of their instructional program were significantly more likely to have higher achievement levels in reading than students not in the program.

What did it take to achieve positive results?

Although these results indicated that for urban DCPS students, participation in I2B was associated with significantly improved literacy achievement, they did not indicate what it took to attain the differences, either with respect to the student instructional activities or the systemic and professional development efforts involved. In order to understand more fully the effects of I2B, we reflected on two years of involvement with the program by considering what we and I2B school liaison personnel who assisted teachers in implementing the program had noted

from frequent classroom visits, responses from evaluation questionnaires completed by each teacher at each of the 12 professional development sessions held during the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 school years, and informal teacher interviews conducted from 2003 through 2005. A close inspection of these data led us to realize that although the contribution of I2B program elements to program effects was complex, they could usefully be conceptualized in terms of practices, principles, and persistence.

Practices

Specific student and teacher practices—both regular classroom instructional activities and teacher professional practices—proved to be significant in contributing to higher student literacy achievement. Four were especially important.

Reading high-quality, age-appropriate, appealing books from a variety of genres that addressed substantive issues important to students.

Student, teacher, and pen pal feedback indicated that the books used in the program were key factors in program success. The books were carefully chosen for the following five characteristics:

1. They exhibited the features of quality children's literature.
2. They were culturally diverse and reflective of the students who would be reading them.
3. They represented a range of levels of reading difficulty at each grade level.
4. They featured children solving problems (not adults solving problems for children).
5. Their overall tone was uplifting.

The five core books given to students and pen pals during the year served to anchor genre study. In addition to these, two or three read-aloud selections for each cycle were provided for the teacher to use to introduce the genre and build context for the unit.

Examples of titles (used for both purposes) from across the various grades included *Martin's Big Words* (Rappaport, 2001), *Me on the Map* (Sweeney, 1996), and *A Chair for My Mother* (Williams, 1982) at grade 2; *The Cool Crazy Crickets* (Elliott, 2000), *Wacky Plant Cycles* (Wyatt, 2000), and *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* (Krull, 2003) at grade 3; *Donavan's Word Jar* (DeGross, 1994), *Kids Communicate* (Rossi, 2001), and *The Woman Who Outshone The Sun* (Martinez, 1991) at grade 4; and *Benjamin Banneker* (Burke, 2003), *America Votes* (Granfield, 2003), and *Vote!* (Christelow, 2004) at grade 5.

In surveys, student and teacher comments about the books' quality were positive and indicated that the vast majority of students found the selections engaging and voluntarily read them numerous times at school and at home. Also, the problem-solving feature of the books proved to be an especially fertile area for exchange between pen pals and students in their letters. In addition, the focus on different genres in the books was significant. For one thing, teacher responses indicated that they found the range of genres useful for achieving district curriculum goals and state standards. But perhaps more important, examining—through discussion in class and with the pen pal—a specific book as an example of a genre helped students achieve a deeper knowledge of what it meant to read in, write about, and, for some students, write in the genre itself. The final factor related to book selection that proved important was the process of periodic review and revision of the titles used in the program. For example, extensive feedback was obtained from students, teachers, and pen pals on a yearly basis in order to gauge books' readability and interest level. Also, each year a book selection committee comprising internationally known children's literature professionals recommended newly published books identified during the year that would be good candidates for the core books and read-alouds used in the program. As a result, a few fresh titles were selected annually for each grade level in order to keep the

selections as appealing and instructionally appropriate as possible.

Reading the program books repeatedly and discussing them. An equally important feature of the program was involving students in reading each book more than once—and doing so for different purposes. In general, the core books given to students were relatively short. Thus, teachers could reasonably expect the students to engage in repeated readings of them, both in school and at home.

When a student was asked to reread a book as part of a classroom activity, the reading was done for a new purpose. For example, after an initial reading of the informational book *Washington, D.C.: A Scrapbook* (Benson, 1999), third graders in one class who had little experience taking notes were asked to reread and fill in a Book Notes chart in which they completed the following stems: In my book, I notice..., I like..., I learned..., and I wonder.... For the Biography cycle, Mark and Map was used as a rereading activity. In this activity, each small group reread a different section of the biography and wrote down all the details about the person's life contained in that section. Next, group members discussed which of the details were essential to understanding the person and placed a check mark next to those. Finally, together the groups created a lifeline (a timeline that tells about a person's life) for that portion of the character's life using the significant details they checked. Repeated readings like these helped build specific comprehension strategies. Other rereadings, such as taking the book home to read to a family member, focused on providing opportunities to enhance reading fluency. In addition, it was noted during classroom observations that most children reread their books after reading their pen pals' letters in order to prepare their own letters to the pen pals. These varied rereadings served to develop the comprehension and fluency skills of students.

Engaging in a process approach to writing in order to compose the letters to the pen pals about the books. When reading and writing are brought together in classroom instruction, each has the capacity to enhance the other, the result being higher achievement in both domains (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Writing to pen pals about the books they read was an ideal vehicle for enabling

grade 2–5 students to integrate these two processes. Much of what teachers had students focus on in reading and discussing the books became the content focus when students composed their pen pal letters. The other significant influence on the students' writing was, of course, the content of the pen pal letter. Moreover, because I2B promoted in its professional development a writing workshop, or process approach, to writing the letters, students were explicitly instructed in strategies for prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing/proofreading, and this was observed to have a positive impact on the quantity and quality of the letters students composed to their pen pals. As one third-grade teacher commented, "I've really been able to fine-tune my teaching of the writing process through the guides and strategies, as well as the feedback information from the results in student letters."

Participating in ongoing professional development (PD). Findings here mirrored those of the CIERA and SBCEP research projects discussed previously and of many others that study school reform and literacy teacher improvement—program success was associated with professional development. All teachers who implemented I2B attended six PD seminars during the year, one near the beginning of school to introduce the program and the five others spaced throughout the year to prepare for each of the five cycles and books. These required programs varied each year, forming a coherent, multiyear sequence of professional development. The first- and second-year PD programs focused on classroom teaching and assessment strategies, and teachers who had participated in the program for more than two years concentrated on developing building-level literacy leadership roles. The individual sessions for the first- and second-year teachers provided a consistent pattern of addressing genre study, literacy instructional strategies, and the assessment–instruction cycle, but the sessions also varied in content with each genre change.

Surveys from the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 school years showed that 82%–90% of teachers rated these sessions as Useful or Very Useful. The other distinctive feature of the PD sessions that teachers indicated made a difference was the assessment of actual student letters and subsequent

discussion of individualized instructional implications based on the assessment.

The ongoing professional development served to create a teaching community within and across schools, as well as to sharpen individual teachers' classroom skills. Optional opportunities were also provided during the year for additional in-depth study. For example, one series of workshops and a graduate credit seminar each focused on different aspects of assessment strategies related to the In2Books Rubric, an instrument designed to enable teachers to systematically evaluate student letters in order to individualize instruction. Integral to the design of I2B PD was the process of teacher involvement in identifying PD needs and goals, a factor to which many teachers responded positively in interviews and surveys.

Principles

As important as practices—what students and teachers did in the classrooms—were to understanding what worked in the DCPS context, perhaps the biggest lesson learned about why I2B had the positive effects it did was found in the principles underlying those practices. We know that teachers can make a difference in student achievement (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000; Readence & Barone, 1997); we also know that programs can make a difference. But the positive effects of a program in school or district A may not occur in school or district B simply by duplicating the practices in the new location. Rather, similar results can be achieved only by understanding how to implement the principles of that program in the new context, modifying the practices as needed and appropriate. In our opinion, one of the biggest mistakes educators and policymakers have made in scaling up a literacy program that has been successful in one setting is thinking that the program practices need to be transferred to the new setting. Instead, we have come to believe that the most robust literacy initiatives are those that are appropriated in ways that conform to the underlying structure and principles of curriculum and instruction rather than only to the surface features of the program.

So what principles formed the core of I2B? Three proved to be especially important.

FIGURE 1
Score points for the comprehension dimension of the In2Books rubric for scoring student letters

Score point	Descriptor
1	Not clear if student read the book.
2	Details show student read the book but not clear if main ideas are understood.
3	Moves beyond merely reporting details to identifying and explaining main idea(s) of the book.
4	Begins to link main idea(s) to saying something about the book theme and/or genre.
5	Some deeper understanding evident. Main idea(s) and theme(s) are elaborated and linked to details. May reflect on genre.
6	Letter is well-developed; thoughtful discussion of main ideas, themes, and significant details. Shows deeper reflection about genre(s) and reading in general.

Note. Taken from Teale, Glasswell, & Zolt (2005, pp. 6-7). Permission to reprint granted by ePALS, Inc.

Authentic, challenging student work. This, we believe, is at the heart of the program's success in DC Public Schools. I2B was designed to focus on authentic and challenging literacy experiences for students, pen pals, and teachers alike. The program made it possible for students to have something they typically experience too rarely in their school literacy instruction—a real audience for their writing. And because their task was to write about the books they read, their reading also was situated within an authentic context. This purposeful context for literacy motivates students because they know that someone besides the teacher will be reading their writing, not to grade it but as part of an ongoing conversation about books and about each other.

The I2B work is challenging because students are not merely required to retell or state literal-level facts from their books but to engage in higher-level thinking about their reading through discussions and letter writing. The In2Books Rubric that teachers use to gauge student progress in writing employs a six-point scale to evaluate student letters on seven different dimensions. Three dimensions relate to how well a letter communicates ideas about the book (comprehension, thinking about the book, connecting with the pen pal), and four relate to language and organizational features of the letter (organization, sentences, word choice/vocabulary, mechanics). Figure 1 shows the six score points of the rubric in the Comprehension category.

The rubric is designed for grade 2–5 students; it is expected that students in any of these grades, but especially in grades 4 and 5, are capable of

achieving the upper level score points (4–6). It can readily be seen that these are rigorous standards that create high expectations for students and teachers alike. They were set this way to provide a challenging context for the authentic literacy work students are doing. The upper levels of the other six dimensions of the rubric are equally challenging.

One other finding related to the authentic nature of student literacy instruction in the program is worth pointing out. High-stakes, standardized reading tests are often held up as the epitome of inauthentic activity (Neill, Guisbond, & Schaeffer, 2004). Many schools even go so far as to virtually shut down actual reading or writing instruction during several weeks prior to the scheduled testing in order to engage students in practice for the test. This practice is seen as the means of raising scores on the test, and it usually consists of completing worksheet-like exercises that mimic the form of the test. Unfortunately, every minute spent in such activity is a minute less of actual literacy instruction for children. It is noteworthy that in DCPS, I2B students managed to score significantly higher on a high-stakes, standardized reading test than non-I2B students although the curriculum deliberately avoided such didactic practice in favor of authentic, challenging literacy instruction. This strongly suggests that attention to authentic, challenging literacy work is applicable to urban contexts and traditionally low-achieving schools as much as to any other type of school.

Finally, the principle of providing authentic, challenging work applied to teachers in the program as well as to students. Central to the I2B pro-

professional development courses was the concept of the assessment–instruction cycle. Teachers were taught how to use the In2Books Rubric to examine individual students’ strengths and needs in writing and to analyze class profiles in order to plan appropriate whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction. This work proved challenging to most of the teachers involved in the program because their prior preparation had not involved learning to systematically and reliably assess student work using a rubric. But once teachers “got it,” they and their students did things differently. As one grade 2 teacher put it,

We just did the folktale cycle. If I didn’t have the [In2Books] Rubric, I would have just had them read the book [*Itching and Twitching*; McKissack & McKissack, 2003] and not asked questions that got them to think about the theme [see Comprehension score point 4]. Later, when the children wrote their letters to their pen pals, several of them remembered our discussions about differences among people and put that in their letters. They wouldn’t have done that without our discussions.

Over the course of the year, approximately 20 teachers opted to complete a supplementary two-day workshop designed to certify student letter scorers. In their evaluations of the workshop, all the participants commented on the challenges they faced in learning to score reliably, but they also all noted that the process was helpful or very helpful for assisting in decisions about “next steps” for teaching individual students. Most participants made comments similar to one teacher who wrote that this way of approaching assessment and instruction “Definitely takes longer than other methods, but the results are *much* more useful—*value* is better!”

Learning community. Like the CIERA and SBCP studies discussed previously, our work with I2B in DCPS underscored the importance of establishing a vibrant learning community. On the one hand, it is fitting to characterize I2B as one big learning community. Students, teachers, principals, pen pals, parents, and even researchers came together, centered on the activities of reading, discussing, and writing about books and learning about life. All constituencies were focused on the same goal—to

help participating students read and write better, enjoy reading and writing, and succeed in life.

The I2B situation may best be characterized as one that develops learning communities comprising smaller learning communities. For example, each classroom was its own literacy learning community supported by professional development programs such as the learning environment created in the summer workshop—“Build Your Classroom Learning Environment” (see Zolt, Yokota, & Teale, 2004, for content of the workshop). In addition, participating teachers formed their own professional learning community (DuFour, 2004). As one of the school principals who had eight classrooms in his school involved in the project stated in a letter submitted to a DCPS Public Hearing on Literacy,

It is very important to foster a rich dialogue with and across grades related to teaching and learning. Having a core group of teachers participate in the required workshops, developing a common vocabulary by which to talk about literacy, has helped to foster deeper conversations. Many of our teachers have also opted to participate in the voluntary workshops on selected topics. The teachers appreciate being treated as professionals and having the opportunity for sustained interaction with quality presenters. (C. Abelman, 2004, personal communication)

Teachers used the professional development sessions and the extensive Internet program resources provided on Teacher Place as entryways into a city-wide community of learners that enhanced teacher communication and learning.

Likewise, the pen pals constituted a learning community. Technology enabled caring adult community members to “come into” the classroom to provide individualized attention to students for academic purposes (exchanging ideas about books; modeling the real life value of reading and writing) and to share their friendship and worldviews. Finally, the program’s digital platform used the Internet to create a unified network of community stakeholders working together to increase student achievement and enhance teacher quality and satisfaction.

Engagement. The books and reading activities included in the I2B program were found to have engaging aspects. As mentioned previously, surveys

and classroom visits provided both student and teacher feedback indicating that the vast majority of book selections were interesting to students and sustained their attention across multiple rereadings. In addition, classroom observations documented considerable enthusiasm among students at all grades on the day they received their letters from pen pals. Not only did students eagerly read and reread their own letters from pen pals, they also shared them with one another. Finally, the activity of writing back to the pen pal about the book was highly motivating to students. They took advantage of the opportunity to write to an adult about what they were reading and thinking. Communicating with a real person engaged the students to a much greater extent than when they wrote to the teacher in order to receive a grade. As one grade 2 teacher put it, "No one had ever written to my children. The whole idea of receiving a letter from someone 'out there' is a captivating concept for my children's age group." A third-grade teacher commented, "they enjoyed reading their letters. They have become more courageous as writers because, I believe, their purpose and intent is very realistic and 'grown up.'" It was interesting also to read the final letters of the school year, both those of the pen pals and those of the students. Many of these letters contained discussions about how rewarding the letter writing experience had been for both of them.

These observations coincide with theory and research indicating that active engagement plays a critical role in student literacy learning—without such engagement, cognitive learning does not occur rapidly, if at all (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). As Gambrell (1996) has argued, engagement "makes the difference between learning that is superficial and shallow and learning that is deep and internalized" (p. 15). Engaged readers and writers not only have acquired literacy skills but also use them for their own purposes, such as pleasure, engaging in social interchange, or satisfying curiosity.

Our analysis suggests that a key to active student engagement provided through I2B was the series of literacy activities reflective of real-life experiences. Students interacted purposefully with their teachers; with one another; and, above all, with their adult pen pals. They read to answer real questions, compose responses to questions posed by their pen pals, and build conceptual knowledge. This type of pen pal context provided powerful mo-

tivation for students to read and write strategically and to learn skills in order to make their letters as good as possible for the real person to whom they wrote. The result was literacy skills and strategy instruction combined in a highly motivational context. Interesting also was the observation that for many students the motivation extended beyond the particular book and the particular letter. They were motivated enough to read other I2B books at their grade level and even other books on the same topic or in the same genre.

Persistence

The final factor that we noted in considering what it took for In2Books to make a difference in student literacy achievement was persistence. Implementing curriculum and instruction of this type was not easy—it took work and a willingness to stay the course. That persistence was demonstrated on a number of fronts. First was the persistence of the teachers and school administrators. As was shown in the results from the research on the SAT-9 results described previously in this article, the reading achievement of the students of teachers who kept with the program more than one year showed even greater growth. This is likely because the initial year of participation in the program presented a fairly steep learning curve to many of the DCPS teachers. They were learning not only how to manage the logistics of the curriculum cycles (book delivery, book reading and associated instructional activities, receiving pen pal letters, writing to pen pals), but also how to implement an approach to teaching that focused on the assessment-instruction cycle and promoted a number of novel reading and writing instructional practices. Classroom observations revealed that with each additional year of implementation, teachers became increasingly comfortable with implementing the principles underlying the overall approach and the associated classroom practices. Preliminary results from analyses in which large samples of student letters across different years were scored with the In2Books Rubric suggested similar multiple-year benefits at the school level as well. Schools that persisted in implementing the program so that students had the experience at more than one grade level got more robust developmental growth patterns in letter writing quality than schools where students had only a one-year experience in the program.

In addition, the persistence of the adult pen pals played a key role. These 2,700 volunteers wrote over 12,000 letters during the course of the school year to DCPS students. They studied the support materials present on the Pen Pal Place website designed to scaffold their letter writing and created letters that established personal relations with the student pen pals; discussed the books' main ideas and significant details and the unit's essential questions; made various connections (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000) with the book; and asked their student pen pals questions designed to get them to think deeply about the book and to interact personally.

Finally, there was the persistence of the students. Their reading, writing, and thinking involvement across the school year—and in many cases across multiple school years—resulted in learning. What we noticed, however, was that mere persistence was not the key. Rather, it was students persistently engaging in large-group, small-group, and individual authentic literacy activities that stimulated their problem solving, imagination, and thinking skills that proved worthwhile. The links among engagement, persistence, and learning seemed to hold the key to accelerated progress in literacy.

Conclusion

The importance of documenting and understanding literacy learning success stories in large urban school districts has become increasingly clear. In settings where the norm is for disproportionate numbers of students to experience difficulty in reading and writing, close examination of the factors that contribute to measurable improvement can provide insight on what can be done to raise literacy achievement on a large scale. Upon finding evidence that In2Books was associated with improvements in reading achievement, we attempted to look beneath the surface of those improvements to gain insight into what actually made a difference. Many reforms have shown that it is possible to produce short-term boosts in test scores. The purpose of conducting the preceding analysis was to identify factors that may contribute to sustained achievement gains in literacy.

The reported data showed that I2B classrooms outperformed comparison classrooms on a nation-

ally normed, standardized assessment of reading achievement. A review of information available from interviews, survey results, and classroom observations indicated that a number of instructional factors may have contributed to the increases: access to high-quality books from a range of genres, reading the program books repeatedly and discussing them, writing letters to pen pals about the books, and engaging in a process approach to writing in order to compose the letters. In addition, the analysis confirmed what other studies have shown—there is a close connection between high-quality classroom literacy instruction and sustained, cumulative professional development for teachers. Looking more deeply, we also concluded that something in addition to classroom practices or providing professional development was at work. Consideration of the principles behind the practices revealed that the authentic, challenging work, the actualization of a learning community, and engagement were all central to the impact of I2B.

We believe that one of the main values of conducting this analysis was the realization that raising reading and writing achievement in a school or district is not simply a matter of selecting the right program and making sure every teacher uses it in his or her classroom. In2Books did not succeed because it was a template to be applied routinely and uniformly in all schools where it was used. Creating meaningful differences in the literacy achievement of elementary school students who have typically struggled with reading and writing is as much about principled action on the part of teachers, students, and administrators as it is about particular instructional practices.

Finally, the analysis helped highlight the role of persistence in creating meaningful change for students. Educators should expect that lasting, positive results in urban contexts will involve considerable work on the part of many, will take multiple years to achieve maximum results, and will require the commitment of both human and financial resources. But what is equally clear from the experience of examining the I2B situation is that a principled approach that centrally involves authentic challenging work and that creates meaningful engagement with the community *can* work in contexts where success in literacy achievement has been difficult to attain.


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